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SUBJECT: INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: A VIEW FROM THE VATICAN

REF: A. A) Meacham-Noyes email of December 1, 2009

[1](#)B. B) VATICAN 95

[1](#)C. C) VATICAN 97 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)D. D) VATICAN 122 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)E. E) Vatican 72

[1](#)F. F) VATICAN 52

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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) In an era of growing contacts and conflicts between faith communities, interfaith dialogue -- to increase understanding and in pursuit of concrete objectives -- is increasingly important. The Holy See is an active proponent and participant in a wide range of these dialogues, in order to promote peace, mutual understanding, religious freedom and human rights, and to seek solutions to local problems. Given the breadth and seriousness of these dialogues, it is vital that the USG engage fully with the Vatican to advance these shared objectives. Septels provide A) an inventory of specific interfaith dialogues in which the Vatican is involved, and B) proposals for USG collaboration with the Vatican on interfaith dialogue. END SUMMARY.

RELIGION AFFECTS POLICY

[1](#)2. (U) According to Gallup opinion polls conducted in 143 countries in 2006, 2007 and 2008, a full 82% of people around the world say religion is an important part of their daily lives. The world's largest religion today is Christianity, comprising around 2.1 billion people globally. (Roman Catholics are the largest Christian denomination, with between 1-1.3 billion adherents; Catholics make up 27% of the U.S. population.) Islam is the world's second-largest religion overall, with 1.5 billion believers globally, in different denominations. Hindus (900 million), traditional Chinese religions (394 million), and Buddhists (376 million) round out the top five faiths in the world. (Note: If counted together, atheists - 1.1 billion globally - would count as the third

largest belief group. Data from HYPERLINK
"http://www.adherents.com"www.adherents.com. End Note)

13. (U) Religious communities were critically important in facilitating democratic transitions in places like South Africa and the former Soviet bloc, and faith groups and leaders continue to influence politics in places like Honduras and Vietnam. Contacts between people of different religious beliefs can contribute to local unrest (as in India), civil wars (in countries like Sudan), or even interstate conflicts (as in the Balkans). And, of course, religion also is often used as a pretext for international terrorism. Changing demographics -- such as the exploding growth of Christianity in Africa and parts of Asia, and Muslim immigration to Europe - are increasing the number of encounters between different faith communities.

VATICAN SUPPORTS BROAD INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, WITH CAVEATS

14. (SBU) In order to reduce frictions, religious leaders in many countries - often supported by secular political leaders and civil society - are intensifying interfaith dialogue. The Holy See, the universal government of the Roman Catholic Church, is one of the leading proponents and practitioners of interreligious dialogue in the world. Some have been going on for over a decade. (Septel describes the Vatican's formal interfaith dialogues.)

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15. (SBU) While the Vatican pursues a number of critical objectives through these dialogues, it is also important to understand what the Vatican is not/not trying to accomplish in its discussions with other faiths. The Vatican believes that only the Catholic Church offers a complete plan for eternal salvation. The Pope and other Vatican officials therefore maintain that it is futile to seek substantive theological agreement with non-Christian religions, beyond very broad principles like the golden rule. Nevertheless, the Vatican also believes that God has given each person the freedom to find his or her own path to salvation. In this context, the goal of the Vatican's interreligious dialogues is to support peaceful, just environments where people can choose and practice their religion and their rights freely.

KEY GOAL OF VATICAN DIALOGUES IS PEACE

16. (SBU) The Vatican, like the United States, believes that religion is often blamed for problems that are essentially political. While power struggles are sometimes cast as religious clashes, they are most often about political control. In its dialogues with other faith communities, the Vatican seeks to differentiate between political and religious matters and always emphasizes the importance of peace as an overarching objective. In this regard, the Vatican opposes the use of force in the Middle East as a matter of principle, except in self-defense or as a last resort. The use of force, the Vatican maintains, is an impediment to religious freedom, because it plays into the hands of those who use religion to justify violence. The Vatican understands that the al-Qaeda of the world may not stop using violence, and that proportional use of

force against them may be needed and legitimate. For most other adversaries and in most situations, however, the Vatican argues that diplomacy, dialogue and concrete follow-up are the right path.

¶7. (SBU) Vatican officials hailed President Obama's Cairo speech, noting their agreement with his exhortations to build trust between Western and Muslim majority countries. Indeed, while applauding the President's defense of religious freedom, Vatican officials said more is needed - the world needs to move beyond mere tolerance and ensure basic rights for all people to practice their respect religions (ref e).

¶8. (U) To achieve these goals, the Vatican funds organizations that support ongoing, positive interfaith encounters. One such organization is the Pontifical Council for the Study of Arabic and Islam (ref f). Its specific goal is to increase the knowledge base among Catholics about Islam, and among Islamic scholars about Christianity, to facilitate interfaith dialogue. Further, the Pontifical Gregorian University hosts an Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies about Religion and Culture. Each year, the Institute brings scholars and practitioners of other religions to Rome to study and teach; the Institute also sponsors seminars and events throughout the year on these topics. Finally, the Pontifical Councils for Christian Unity and Interfaith Dialogue participate in a very wide range of interfaith events, large and small, around the world each year.

EVEN MISSTEPS IN DIALOGUES HAVE ADVANCED UNDERSTANDING

¶9. (SBU) Leaders from other religious communities, such as Jordanian Prince Ghazi Bin Talal, have praised publicly the Vatican's commitment to interfaith dialogue. Nevertheless, the

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Vatican has made missteps in its outreach to other faith groups. Yet even the occasional gaffes have sometimes served to increase dialogue and understanding. In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a speech that quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor's criticism of Islam. Many Muslims were angered and the Holy See had to work hard to mend fences. The reconciliation efforts ultimately led to the opening in 2008 of a major Catholic-Muslim interfaith dialogue, the "Common Word" initiative (see also septel). Early in 2009, a Papal decision to reintegrate a schismatic group into the Church ran afoul of Jews when the group was revealed to include a Holocaust denier. Again, the Vatican made special efforts to repair the rift, and internationally respected Jewish leaders have told the Embassy that Catholic-Jewish relations are today on a stronger footing than before the crisis (ref c).

OTHER PRIORITIES INCLUDE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

¶10. (U) The Vatican believes that adherents of all religions can agree that human beings are all equal in dignity and thus entitled to live in freedom. Therefore, Holy See officials engage in interreligious dialogue worldwide in order to support Pope Benedict's overarching goal of increasing religious freedom globally - also a critical USG priority. Indeed, religious freedom is a critical priority for the Vatican, which is deeply

concerned about the persecution of Christians worldwide. A recent report by a Vatican-affiliated group, "Aid to the Church in Need," concluded that 75-85% of people persecuted for their beliefs are Christians. The Vatican advocates for religious freedom for people of all faiths, however, not just Christians.

¶11. (SBU) The Vatican also uses its dialogues with other faith communities to promote human rights globally. The Holy See is a strong defender of individual rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of conscience, for example, even/when their exercise results in the rejection or criticism of religion. Indeed, Vatican diplomats have partnered with American diplomats to defend freedom of expression. Vatican diplomats at the United Nations have lobbied actively against religious defamation resolutions sponsored by the Organization for the Islamic Conference.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ALSO HELPS SOLVE LOCAL PROBLEMS

¶12. (U) At the same time, Catholic leaders - both ordained and lay people - participate in concrete interfaith encounters in their own communities every day. At a recent Embassy-sponsored conference on pediatric HIV/AIDS, for example, a Catholic priest in Indonesia shared compelling stories about his collaboration with local imams to get medication and care for infected children. In addition, Catholic lay groups such the Sant'Egidio Community (ref B) or the Focolare Movement are deeply involved in interfaith dialogue and interfaith action to address the big issues, but also to increase collaboration in areas like education, climate change, or care for children or the elderly.

COMMENT: U.S. SHOULD DEEPEN INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT WITH VATICAN

¶13. (SBU) The Vatican's objectives for its interfaith dialogues are in fully in line with USG priorities. Closer USG coordination with the Holy See on these issues would be highly

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beneficial in terms of meeting USG goals for interfaith discussions, to: "1) build understanding, 2) facilitate connections, and 3) inspire constructive action toward shared policy goals" (ref a). Moreover, by working more intensively with the Vatican to facilitate interfaith discussions and actions, the USG could also leverage support from religious constituencies elsewhere for the same ends. Septel lays out proposals for increased U.S.-Vatican collaboration in support of interfaith dialogue and action.

¶14. (U) One final, shameless plug: Embassy Vatican has created an information-sharing portal, updated daily, on a wide range of issues that involve the Catholic Church worldwide. The inter-religious section contains many useful entries. It is available here:
<http://vatican.state.gov/inter-religious-dialogue/>. The Embassy would welcome comments and additions to this page.
DIAZ